When Determiners Abound:
Implications for the Encoding of Definiteness*

Marika Lekakou and Kriszta Szendrői

1 Introduction

The topic of this paper is the encoding of definiteness in Modern Greek. Modern Greek has a definite article, which at first sight seems to be performing the regular function of a definite determiner, in terms of contributing semantic definiteness. Definite noun phrases in Modern Greek obligatorily require the definite article, as indicated in (1a). In fact, the determiner is required even on proper names in argument position. This is shown in (1b):

(1) a. *(Ο) kathijitis eftase protos.
    the teacher arrived first
    ‘The teacher arrived first.’

b. *(Ο) Janis ine kathijitis.
    the John is teacher
    ‘John is a teacher.’

The picture of definiteness in Modern Greek is, however, more complicated than what the above facts would suggest. This becomes obvious when we
consider, in addition to more or less straightforward cases such as (1), the phenomenon of determiner spreading or polydefiniteness. Polydefinites are cases where a noun is modified by an adjective, and noun and adjective are each accompanied by a definite determiner, as illustrated in (2a) and (2b). Polydefinites exist in Modern Greek alongside monadic definites, i.e. instances of ‘regular’ adjectival modification inside a definite nominal, illustrated in (2c).3,4

(2) a. i asimenia i pena
   the-fem.nom silver      the-fem.nom pen

   b. i pena i asimenia
       the-fem.nom pen    the-fem.nom silver

   c. i asimenia pena
       the-fem.nom silver    pen
   ‘the silver pen’

As we will see in detail in section 3, polydefinites are not semantically polydefinite. For example, the polydefinite in (2a) and (2b) refers to a single unique entity, and in particular one at the intersection of the set of silver entities and the set of pens. This means that in (2a/b), it cannot be the case that both determiners make a semantic contribution. In other words, polydefinites are only polydefinite in the morphosyntax, not in the semantics. Despite existing differences between monadic definites and polydefinites, reviewed briefly in section 2, in terms of definiteness the constructions are equivalent: they both contain only one source of definiteness. Moreover, note that, morphologically, there is no distinction between the multiple determiners in (2): both within the polydefinite construction and across polydefinites and monadic definites the shape of determiners is identical. This applies in all cases, i.e. across all case-number-gender combinations. In other words, from the point of view of morphology, we are dealing with one and the same element in all these instances.

Given these facts, the following questions are raised for Modern Greek: (a) how is definiteness achieved in polydefinites, and (b) what is the nature of definiteness more in general, in light of the polydefinite construction? What

3 The terms ‘polydefinite’ and ‘monadic definite’ are due to Kolliakou (2004).
4 Abbreviations used: acc= accusative, dial= dialectal, def= definite, fem= feminine, gen= gen- itive, masc= masculine, neg= negative element, neut= neuter, nom= nominative, nonact= non-active, pl= plural, sg= singular, stan= standard.